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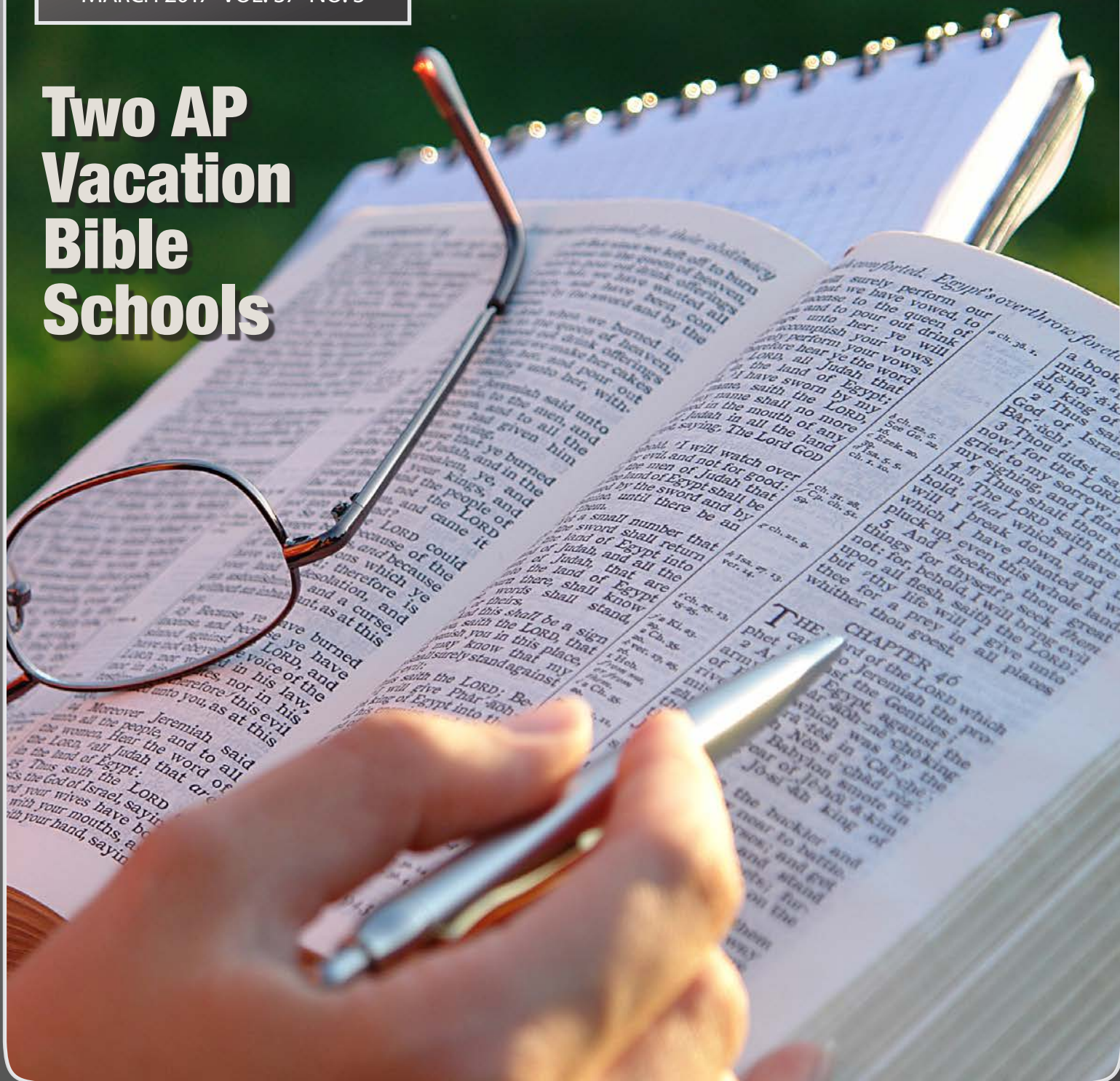
REASON & REVELATION

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SYSTEMATICALLY UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE BETTER PART 2

Two AP Vacation Bible Schools



Systematically Understanding the Bible Better [Part 2]

Eric Lyons, M.Min.

Article In Brief...



Nothing in the world is more important to comprehend than the words that God revealed in written form for our eternal benefit. Millions of precious souls may have access to the Bible, but they often do not know where to begin. Truly and effectively comprehending the Scriptures requires an awareness of the eight vital, elementary truths and preliminary principles of Bible study discussed in this two-part article.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Part 1 of this two-part series appeared in the February issue. Part 2 follows below and continues, without introductory comments, where the first article ended.]

#6—CONSIDER THE KIND OF COMPOSITION

ON any given day, we may read a definition in a dictionary, a romantic love letter written by our spouse, a law passed by Congress, an article from a favorite satiric Web site, and the lyrics of an eccentric song we are contemplating downloading for our children. Obviously, if we really care to understand the meaning of these compositions, we are going to take note of the fact that they are categorically quite different. Love letters do not read like laws (at least we hope not); laws do not read like lyrics; and lyrics do not read like dictionaries. One particular preliminary principle of biblical interpretation to keep

in mind is the need to pay special attention to the **kind** of composition. Are you reading laws, letters, prayers, and prologues penned in prose, or are you analyzing prophecies, lyrics, and speeches written in poetry?

The everyday language that people customarily use in writing (like that which you are reading at this very moment) is prose. This ordinary literary medium is distinguished from poetry, which may be characterized by its rhythm or rhyme (or some other regular, creative pattern), as well as varying kinds of figurative language. The Holy Spirit chose to communicate His message through man using varieties of both prose and poetry. If we want to succeed at effectively interpreting Scripture and arriving at the Truth that God communicated (and that He wants us to learn—1 Timothy 2:4), we need to identify the kind of composition Bible writers used in various sections of Scripture. Consider a few of these.

History

Much of the Bible should be recognized as a historical composition, full of real people, places, dialogue, and events, written primarily in ordinary language (prose). Genesis is principally a book of history that details the beginning of numerous things, including matter, energy, life, mankind, sin, and the nation of Israel.¹ The book of Numbers is a historical book that describes many events that occurred during Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The 12 Old Testament books of Joshua through Esther are oftentimes referred to as "the books of history." They chronicle Israel's history from the time they entered the Promised Land through the period of the judges, the United Kingdom, the Divided Kingdom, and their return to Jerusalem following 70 years of captivity in Babylon.

More than half of the content of the New Testament could be categorized as history. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John detail many events in the life of Christ, while the book of Acts (written by Luke) serves as a brief history of the first 30 years of the Lord's Church. Although these books only make up five of the 27 in the New Testament, their total content is more voluminous than the rest of the 22 books combined.

Law

Though generally the Bible may be broken down into three law systems (Patriarchal Law, Law of Moses, and Law of Christ),² a few books are largely made up of numerous laws and need to be recognized as such. The Bible writers frequently referred to the first five books of the Bible as "the Law" (or more precisely, the Law of Moses) due doubtlessly to the number of laws that Moses communicated to the Israelites. Exodus records the giving of the Ten Commandments, laws about the Passover (which was instituted in Exodus), tort laws, slavery laws, and more. Leviticus contains

over 200 individual laws, which, as the name “Leviticus” would suggest, largely focus on matters pertaining to the levitical priesthood, the Temple, sacrifices, religious festivals, etc. Deuteronomy, the English name given to the fifth book of Moses,³ means “The Second Law,” and refers to the retelling of the laws of God to a new Israelite generation (since the former generation passed away during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness). Unlike Leviticus, which contains many laws unique to the levitical priesthood, the laws in Deuteronomy focus more on all of Israel. This “retelling of the Law” includes the Ten Commandments, as well as laws concerning families, the community, war, idolatry, and much more.

Reading and interpreting books made up primarily of law is quite different than digesting other kinds of composition, whether written in prose or a poetic style. Poetry obviously includes a great amount of figurative language, but so do many speeches, letters, and descriptions written in prose. Law is almost always written in clear, concrete language. As D.R. Dungan explained:

If law is being interpreted, we do not expect to find a single figurative expression. The author has evidently tried to be severely plain and definite. The very purpose of law precludes the thought of anything in the composition but the plainest and most direct form of speech. It has been the intent of him who gave the law to have his will carried out by the people. Hence we expect him to use every precaution to prevent any misunderstanding.⁴

Keep in mind, though all biblical books may generally be categorized as a particular kind of writing (e.g., history or law written in prose), they often still contain sections of other unique forms of writing. The Law of Moses, for example, contains speeches, descriptions, genealogies,

songs, and much more. But primarily, they are books of law and history.

Epistle

Although we refer to the 66 major sections of the English Bible as “books,” several of them are actually “epistles” (another term for “letter”).⁵ In fact, **most** of the New Testament “books” are epistles. One normally has to read only the first few lines of these documents to detect their epistle-type form (discovering the identity of the sender and the recipient, as well as a greeting and a prayer or statement of thanksgiving). Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude all wrote one or more New Testament epistles to many different people in a number of different locations for a variety of different reasons.

In their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart acknowledged various differences in the New Testament epistles, but went on to highlight what “all of the epistles have in common” that readers need to especially note—“the crucial thing to note in reading and interpreting them”:

They are all what are technically called *occasional documents* (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific

occasion), and they are *all* from the *first century*. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors—that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century—that make their interpretation difficult at times.

Above all else, their occasional nature must be taken seriously. This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some special circumstance, either from the reader’s side or the author’s.... Usually the occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.⁶

If we ever want to arrive at a proper understanding of the biblical epistles, it is paramount that we first identify their unique format (which is not a difficult task). Then, once we learn of their letter-like style, we should move on and actually read it like a letter (though an inspired letter). That is, read it in its entirety, paragraph by paragraph, asking questions all along the way, such as, “What is the occasion of this epistle? What is the writer getting at? What is this letter

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all about? What is its purpose?" In short, if we expect to understand the New Testament epistles, we must do more than thoughtlessly picking and choosing a few verses here and there to prove some point that we think they teach (when upon a fuller, thoughtful, and serious study, they may not).

Prophecy

The last 17 books of the English Old Testament make up what is frequently called "the books of prophecy." Isaiah through Daniel are known as the "Major Prophets," while Hosea through Malachi are referred to as the "Minor Prophets."⁷ Revelation is the only book in the New Testament that fits into the category of prophecy (though it is also a letter—1:4-7; 22:21), as it contains inspired visions given to the apostle John in the first century about "things which must shortly take place" (1:1).

Most people seem to have the impression that the prophets were primarily future-tellers. Though they certainly foretold (by the revelation of God) many things that would soon, or eventually, come to pass, primarily the prophets were **forthtellers**. That is, they were first and foremost public proclaimers of the will of God, including, and especially, reminding their audiences of (1) the blessings of submitting to God's laws, and (2) the consequences of rejecting them.

The prophetic books present interpretation challenges for at least three notable reasons.⁸ First, similar to some of the difficulties in properly understanding the New Testament epistles (as well as the Psalms), the Prophets generally offer few hints regarding their historical settings.⁹ Thus, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and various handbooks can be quite helpful in ascertaining relevant historical background information. Second, many of the proclamations and prophecies in the last 17 books of the Old Testament are in the form of Hebrew poetry, which is

significantly different than the customary poetic features (e.g., rhyme) of modern-day America. Third, the Old Testament prophets and the apostle John (in Revelation) used a great deal of figurative phrases and symbols, including apocalyptic language, which communicates important truths to the intended audience while veiling the message to outside forces (who could misuse the prophetic utterances against them). The book of Revelation, as well as various parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, etc., contain extensive amounts of apocalyptic language and symbols which conscientious 21st-century Bible students must handle with the greatest amount of care and concern. (To interpret such language literally, rather than figuratively, leads to a complete misunderstanding of the inspired message.)

Poetry

Those unfamiliar with the Bible are likely surprised to learn how much poetry it contains. As mentioned earlier, the prophets (whose writings make up 17 of the 39 books of the Old Testament) often spoke and wrote their stirring messages in the form of poetry. Pieces of poetic history, prophecy, and lyric (including the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15, the beautiful, brief, priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, and the song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55) are sprinkled throughout many books of the Bible. Poetry dominates the composition style of Job through Song of Solomon so much so that when grouping books of the Bible together, many refer to these five as "The Books of Poetry." Psalms and Song of Solomon, as their titles suggest, are obviously poetic, while about 90% of the book of Job is poetry.

Although "the division between prose and poetry in ancient Heb. is not precise," thankfully "certain literary devices in poetry allow us to identify poems with a high level of confidence."¹⁰ In his helpful

discussion of poetry in the *New Bible Dictionary*, T. Longman III highlighted three primary poetic devices frequently found in Scripture: terseness, imagery, and most notably, parallelism.¹¹ Hebrew parallelism is a "peculiar repetition of form, and usually of thought also, in successive, or alternate lines."¹² Oftentimes the parallel thought is "synonymous,"¹³ while at other times there is an advancing thought (known as "synthetic parallelism"),¹⁴ or a contrasting thought (called "antithetical parallelism").¹⁵

Except for the lyrics we hear from modern-day musicians, most Americans (including myself) generally seem to have little interest in poetry.¹⁶ No doubt, many today wonder why God chose to compose a significant amount of His written revelation to man in a poetic style. Surely He wasn't simply trying to make life more difficult than it already is. In truth, there are at least two logical possibilities why God chose this style of composition. First, many ancient cultures highly prized poetic modes of expression. Thus, it made perfect sense for God's messengers, at least occasionally, if not regularly, to compose **poetic** messages. Second, people tend to remember truths more easily when they are communicated in poetry. Even those of us who do not appreciate poetry as much as we probably should, must admit that truths conveyed with rhyme, rhythm, or some other poetic device are often much easier to remember.¹⁷ Furthermore, we must keep in mind that

God made use of this helpful phenomenon in an age where reading and writing were rare skills and where private ownership of written documents was virtually unknown. Thus the larger parts of the prophetic oracles were usually expressed in poetic form. People were used to poetry and could remember those prophecies; they would ring in their ears.¹⁸

One of the most important characteristics of poetry to keep in mind,

especially as it relates to interpreting the Word of God fairly and accurately, is the amount of hyperbole it employs. Hyperbole is exaggeration. It is “language that describes something that is better or worse than it really is.”¹⁹ It serves the purpose of heightening the sense of what is being described. If a person hasn’t eaten all day, he could say that he is “really hungry.” Or, he might say it in a hyperbolic way: “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” Could he really eat an entire horse? No, and to interpret his words thusly would be to misunderstand his intended exaggeration. Similarly, when, for example, David proclaimed in the poetic language of Psalm 58:3, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies,” he employed strong, figurative language. Obviously, no babies literally speak lies from the moment that they are born. However, the wicked judges of David’s day had been unrighteous for many years—since rather early on in their lives (but not when they were innocent babies).²⁰ As long as we are aware of the hyperbolic element of poetry, statements such as that found in Psalm 58:3 (and many other places in Scripture, especially in the poetic parts) will be rather easy to properly understand.

#7—IDENTIFY FOUR “WHO’S”

IMAGINE going for an afternoon stroll in Central Park and finding a small, faded piece of paper on the ground with these words: “Help my son before he dies.” In addition to being shocked by the message, most likely you would immediately begin asking a number of reasonable questions: Who wrote the note? Who was the note about? Who was the note written to? Was the note meant especially for you or someone else, or was it meant for just anyone who reads it? Did someone in Manhattan pen the note, or was it from someone outside of the city? Was there an original recipient of the note who

already helped the boy and discarded the note afterwards, or is the writer of the note still waiting for someone to help his/her son?

These kinds of questions are similar to the ones Bible students need to ask in order to come to a better understanding of Scripture. If we attempt to conclude certain things about the biblical text without giving serious thought to the following “Four Who’s,” we will likely misunderstand some of the divinely revealed message.

Who is Writing?

If you knew that the note you found in Central Park was written by a deceased 20th-century playwright who worked on Broadway and specialized in fictional tragedy plays, you would become very relieved. First, since the famous writer has been dead for several years, there is likely no longer an immediate concern. Second, since the playwright often wrote tragedies about missing persons, the note you found may simply be from a fictional manuscript he produced that subsequently was lost.

Identifying certain things about the author helps to give context to his overall message. Of course, as stated in principle #3 (in Part 1 of this article), God is the ultimate Source of all of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21).²¹ But God used humanity to communicate His Truth. If possible, Bible students need to learn something about the one whom God chose to write the particular Bible book they are studying. Does the penman specifically identify himself?²² Is he identified by another writer?²³ Was the penman a king (like David), a fisherman (like Peter), or a physician (like Luke)? Was the writer living under Patriarchal Law, the Law of Moses, or the Law of Christ? If under Mosaic Law, in what particular period was he living? Was it, for example, during the time of the judges, the United Kingdom, or the Divided Kingdom? If during the Divided Kingdom, was the penman

writing from the Northern Kingdom (Israel) or the Southern Kingdom (Judah)? Was he writing during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (852-841 B.C.), or did the penman live more than two centuries later, during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.)? Questions such as these (and others) help give us a proper perspective when reading and interpreting the Scriptures.

Who is the Writer’s Original Audience?

If you saw a man write a note on December 31st that said, “I’ll see you next year,” you would understand the message much better if you knew something about the recipient. If the note, for example, was directed toward a colleague that the author normally saw five days a week, then you could understand that the message-writer most likely meant (in somewhat of a witty manner) that he would see his co-worker in the next day or two. On the other hand, if you knew the note was for a distant relative that the writer normally only saw once a year around the holidays, then you would obviously come to a different conclusion about the message.

The simple fact is, the 66 books of the Bible were written to a number of different people, who lived in different places, and at different times in history. Was the document originally directed to the Jews, to the Gentiles, or to Christians? Was it written to a single individual or to a local church? Deuteronomy, meaning “Second Law,” was written to the entire national of Israel—but to a different generation (cf. Numbers 14:26-38) than the one that originally received the Ten Commandments and the laws of Exodus and Leviticus. The repetition of Deuteronomy (e.g., Deuteronomy 5:1-22) makes perfect sense in light of the original recipients of the “Second Law.”

The four inspired accounts of the Gospel of Christ make more sense when we consider that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had different

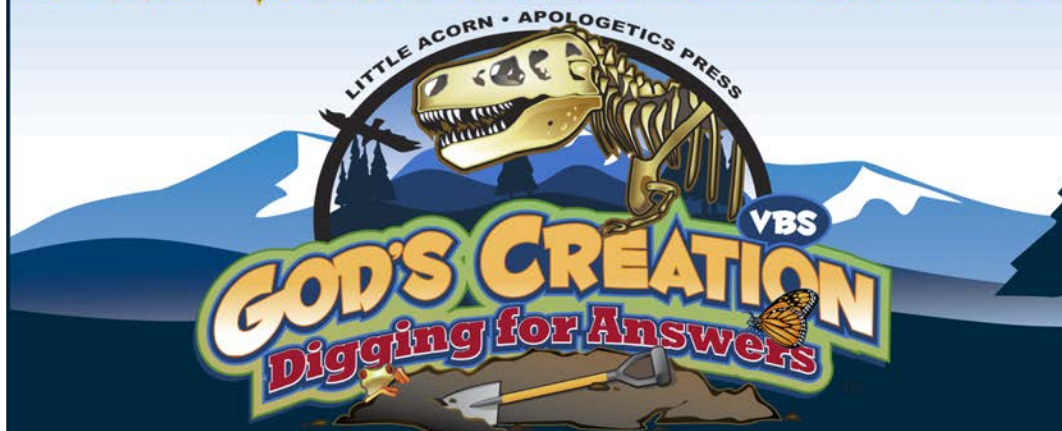
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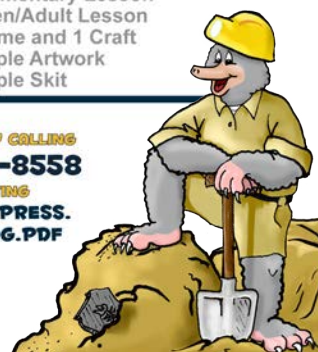
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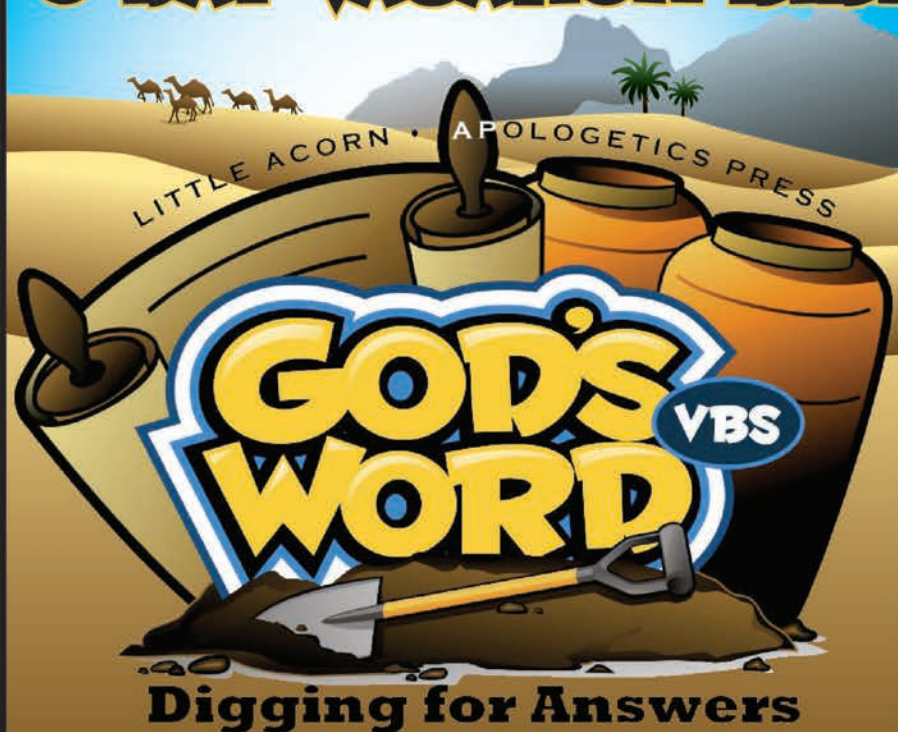
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audiences in mind while penning their narratives. In the introduction to his excellent article titled simply, “The Four Gospel Accounts,” Wayne Jackson observed:

When Jesus was crucified, the superscription on the cross above his head proclaimed, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” It was written in three tongues—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—representing the three dominant cultures of the Mediterranean world when the New Testament was produced.

It is not without significance that there is a Gospel record designed for each of these societal elements. Matthew’s record was directed to the Hebrews, Mark was written for the Romans, and Luke was designed to address the Greeks. John’s narrative, however, was cosmopolitan in its thrust.²⁴

Jackson proceeded to give evidences throughout the rest of his article proving his thesis, including, for example, the fact that, unlike Matthew, Mark must have had a non-Jewish audience in mind, since he “has to explain Hebrew traditions (7:3) and Palestinian conditions (11:13).”²⁵ What’s more, the Latinisms within Mark indicate that he wrote for Roman readers.²⁶ In short, the individual books of the Bible come into much better focus when we consider their original recipients.

Who is Speaking?

This question is not, “Who is writing?” but rather “Who is speaking?” That is, who is the writer quoting? Is the speaker in the narrative an inspired spokesman or an **uninspired** individual? Although the Bible contains many inspired quotations, including statements, sermons, and prophecies by Moses, David, Isaiah, Jesus, John the Baptizer, Peter, Stephen, Paul, etc., a careful distinction must be made between (a) an **inspired statement** recorded by an inspired writer, and (b) an

uninspired statement recorded by an inspired writer.

Even though “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16), not everything that the inspired writers recorded was a true statement. For example, after God created Adam, He told him not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil lest he die (Genesis 2:17). Yet, when the serpent approached Eve, he “informed” her that she would **not** die if she ate of this forbidden fruit (3:4). Obviously, Satan was not inspired by God to lie and say, “You will not surely die.” However, hundreds of years later, when Moses wrote Genesis, recording the events that took place in Eden, he wrote by inspiration of God the lie that Satan told (cf. Luke 24:44; John 5:46). When Jesus healed a demoniac, some of the Pharisees accused Him of casting out demons, not by the power of God, but by the power of “Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (Matthew 12:24). Like Moses, Matthew did not write a lie, but merely reported a lie.

Bible students must keep in mind who is doing the talking in the particular text they are studying. The above examples are rather elementary: Satan’s statement and the Pharisees’ allegations clearly were false. But what about when statements are made by individuals who do not seem “as bad” as these? Oftentimes when attempting to defend a certain doctrine, a person will quote a verse from the book of Job and say, “See, that’s what it says...the book of Job says...therefore my doctrine is proven true.” Not long ago I read an article by a gentleman who was defending a doctrine by citing various verses in the book of Job. This man never indicated who made the statements; he simply cited all of them as being true statements. Sadly, such a handling of Scripture totally disregards one of the fundamental rules of interpretation—knowing who is speaking. One who studies Job must realize that it is an inspired book that contains **many**

uninspired statements. For instance, we know that Job’s wife was incorrect when she told him to “Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). We also know that many statements made by Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were incorrect. Nine of the 42 chapters in the book were speeches by these “miserable comforters” (16:2) whom God said had “not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has” (42:7). Clearly then, one never should quote these men and claim it as an inspired truth.

Furthermore, we must understand that even though Job was “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (1:1), there is no indication that his speeches were inspired. In fact, when Jehovah finally answered Job out of the whirlwind, He asked: “Who is this who darkens counsel by **words without knowledge?**” (38:2).²⁷ Obviously, God never would have asked such a rhetorical question had Job been inspired while stating the things he spoke in those chapters. Later, Job even said himself: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, **which I did not know**” (42:3; cf. 30:16-23). Clearly, then, these passages indicate that Job’s speeches were not inspired (unlike God’s speeches in chapters 38-41). So, as Bible students, let’s handle them carefully. Let’s remember to pay close attention to “who is speaking.”

Who is the Speaker’s Audience?

When Moses wrote that God said, “Make yourself an ark of gopherwood” (Genesis 6:14), these words were spoken to a particular audience of one. The command was not given to Adam, Abraham, Moses, or any Christian in the 1st century. The specific command was for a particular audience: “God said **to Noah...**” (6:13). God’s command to Noah was not part of the Old Law given to all Israelites, nor was it part of the Law of Christ to which everyone living today is subject. It was a specific command spoken by God to Noah, which Moses recorded

approximately 1,000 years later for our learning (Romans 15:4), but not for our specific observance.

The apostle John recorded that in the last week of Jesus' life, He said: "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). He promised that "when the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth;... He will tell you things to come" (16:13). In order to understand properly this promise, we must consider the speaker's audience; Jesus was talking to the **apostles**—His special disciples, including Peter, John, Thomas, and Philip.²⁸ The promise of **supernatural revelation and guidance** was promised to them (cf. Acts 2:1-40), not to every follower of Jesus for the past 2,000 years. The fact is, **"the faith...was once for all** delivered to the saints" in the first century (Jude 3), so that since that time Christians have had **"all things that pertain to life and godliness"** (2 Peter 1:3). Since the Holy Spirit miraculously guided into "all truth" those to whom He was promised, Christians have been **"thoroughly equipped for every good work"** (2 Timothy 3:16-17)—guided by the oral and written teachings of these men (cf. Ephesians 3:1-5). In short, paying close attention to the speaker's original audience will go a long way in properly understanding Holy Writ.²⁹

#8—OBSERVE THE CONTEXT

EFFECTIVE communication is impossible without the participants taking into consideration the context in which statements are made. Imagine a mother sitting in a warm gym in the middle of winter watching her son Jimmy miss 10 consecutive shots in the first half of a basketball game. She turns to her husband and says, "He's as cold as he can be." The mother obviously means that her son "can't hit anything"; he's not shooting the basketball very well. A little

while later, however, when the family walks outside of the gym into the frigid Wisconsin winter night, the mother says to her husband, "Jimmy's freezing." The husband immediately understands what she means given the current context of the comment. Mom is simply concerned about her son's well-being and wants to get him warm as soon as possible.

Given the multiple meanings of most words, the flexibility of language, and the many figures of speech that can be found in languages all over the world, context is critical to understanding most everything.³⁰ What exactly do we mean by "context"? Clinton Lockhart briefly defined the meaning of the word in his excellent book titled *Principles of Interpretation*:

The *Context* of a word or expression is that part of a discourse which is immediately connected with it, or that precedes or follows it. The parts which are closely connected are the *immediate context*; while those of another paragraph or chapter form the *remote context*. In most writings and utterances there is such a connection of thought in clauses, sentences, and paragraphs, that one part will to some extent indicate the meaning of another part.³¹

Perhaps no Bible verse has been misused more in modern times than Matthew 7:1—"Judge not, that you be not judged." From church pews to barstools, from the "Bible belt" to Hollywood, Matthew 7:1 is ripped from its context and confidently quoted as proof that "Jesus said, 'Don't judge.' Don't tell anyone they're doing wrong at anytime."³² But is that really what Jesus meant? Actually, the **context proves otherwise**. Consider how a close look at the surrounding verses and chapters help to correct abuses of Matthew 7:1 and to give its true meaning.

Throughout Matthew chapters 5-7 (often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus publicly criticized the Jewish scribes and Pharisees for their self-righteousness and abuse of the Old Testament. Near the beginning of this sermon, Jesus stated: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The unrighteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus wanted His audience to understand that self-righteousness would not be permitted in the kingdom of heaven; rather, it would lead

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March 26	Katy, TX	(832) 654-3618

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March 17-19	Murray, KY	(270) 489-2219
March 31-April 2	Steele, MO	(573) 695-2470

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to “condemnation” in hell (5:20; cf. 23:14,33). A follower of God must be “poor in spirit” (5:3), not filled with pride. He must love his enemies, not hate them (5:44). He is to do good deeds, but only to please God, not men (6:1-4). The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of wearing “righteousness” on their sleeves, rather than in their hearts (6:1-8; cf. 23:1-36). It was in the midst of such strong public rebuke that Christ proclaimed:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me remove the speck from your eye”; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye (Matthew 7:1-5).

In Matthew 6:1-4, Jesus instructed us **not** to do charitable deeds...“as the hypocrites do” (to be seen of men). In 6:5-8, Jesus told us **not** to pray...“like the hypocrites” (to be heard of men). In 6:16-18, Jesus taught us **not** to fast...“like the hypocrites” (to be seen of men). Likewise, in Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus was teaching us that judging another is wrong...**when that judgment is hypocritical.**

But, what if we are doing charitable deeds **to be seen of God**? Then by all means, “do good to all men” (Galatians 6:10)! What if our prayers are led from a pure heart and with righteous intentions? Should we pray? Most certainly (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Can we fast today, if the purpose of our fasting is **to be seen of God** and not men? Yes. But what about passing judgment? In Matthew 7:1-5, did Jesus condemn **all** judging, or, similar to the above examples, did He condemn only **a certain kind** of judging? Matthew 7:5 provides the answer. After condemning

unrighteous judgments (7:1-4), Jesus instructed a person to “first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” He was saying, in essence, “Get your life right first. Then, in love, address your brother’s problem.” This is consistent with what Paul wrote to the church at Philippi: “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (2:4). God never intended for Christians to be recluses who never interacted with those around them (Luke 19:10; Galatians 6:1). Rather, He gave us the responsibility of helping others by lovingly correcting them when they sin. In Matthew 7, Jesus was not suggesting that a person can **never** judge. He was saying, **when** you judge, **judge righteously** (as when we pray, fast, and do good deeds—do it without hypocrisy—John 7:24). Incidentally, Jesus already had judged the Pharisees. Thus, He obviously was not teaching that judging is inherently wrong.

Further proof that Jesus did not condemn all judging can be found throughout the rest of chapter 7. In fact, **in the very next verse** after His statements about judging, Jesus implicitly commanded that His followers make a judgment. He said: “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (7:6). Disciples of Christ must judge as to who are “dogs” and who are “hogs.” Otherwise, how can we know when not to give that which is holy to “dogs”? Or how can we know when not to cast our pearls before “swine”? Jesus said we must judge between those who are “worthy” and those who are like dogs and pigs (cf. Matthew 10:12-15; Acts 13:42-46).³³ A few verses later, Jesus again implied that His disciples must make a judgment.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but

inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them (Matthew 7:15-20).

Question: How can we “watch out” for false prophets if we cannot make judgments as to who the false prophets are? According to Jesus, determining the identity of false teachers involves inspecting “their fruits” and making judgments—righteous judgments. The simple fact is, those who teach that Jesus was condemning all judging in Matthew 7:1 are guilty of ignoring the context of the passage (as well as the numerous verses throughout the rest of Scripture which teach that sincerely judging the sinful lifestyles of others is necessary).³⁴ In short, observing the context of any Bible statement is critical to understanding it properly.

CONCLUSION

NOTHING in the world is more important to comprehend than the words that God revealed in written form for our eternal benefit. Millions of precious souls around the globe may have access to the Bible, but they often do not know where to begin. Their honest reaction to the idea of reading the Bible is similar to the reaction of a student walking into his first algebra class: intimidated and confused. They know that the Bible is a book, but that is about the extent of their knowledge.

We believe that a person can systematically understand the Bible better by taking special note of the eight elementary truths and preliminary principles discussed in this article. Let’s help interested individuals understand (1) the need to be fair with the Bible, (2) that the Bible

claims to be divinely inspired, (3) that the Bible possesses the attributes of Divine inspiration, (4) the need for a reliable Bible translation, (5) the importance of breaking down the Bible in order to build up comprehension, (6) the need to recognize the style of composition, (7) the importance of identifying “four who’s” of any text, and (8) the significance of paying special attention to the context of all biblical statements.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Genesis chapter 1 details the history of the six days of Creation. Chapter 3 describes the history of the Fall of Man. Chapters 6-9 record the history of Noah and the Flood, while chapter 11 gives various historical details of what occurred at the Tower of Babel. Although some liberal scholars have attempted to rationalize a non-historical view of Genesis 1-11 in an attempt to hang on to central components of the Theory of Evolution (e.g., billions of years of time), the fact is, critical analysis of Genesis (and especially of Genesis 1-11), confirms what most people can easily detect from even a superficial investigation of the book—it was written as a real history, and not as a myth or an exaggerated legend. For more information, see “Genesis 1 thru 11—Mythical or Historical?” Apologetics Press, www.apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=11&article=451.
- ² Discussed in Part 1 of this article.
- ³ “Deuteronomy” is derived from the Greek name (*Deuteronomion*) given to the fifth book of Moses in the Septuagint. The Hebrew title for Deuteronomy is *Hadebharim*, meaning “the words,” which is derived from the first line of the book.
- ⁴ D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light, reprint), p. 166.
- ⁵ Admittedly, some make various distinctions between letters and epistles (contending that epistles, rather than letters, are more formal literary works that were written more for posterity). It is not my purpose to make this distinction here, nor to propose which New Testament epistles are more or less formal. The purpose here is more general in nature.
- ⁶ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (2014), *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*

- (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), p. 60, italics in orig.
- ⁷ The “Minor” prophetic books are known as such, not because they are less important, but because they are much shorter in overall length.
 - ⁸ Admittedly, other challenges exist, including the difficulty in attempting to discover the original chronological order of the various oracles.
 - ⁹ Their cultural, political, and overall historical backgrounds were vastly different from our own. The three centuries covered in the prophetic books of Isaiah-Malachi (760 B.C.-460 B.C.) were characterized by “unprecedented political, military, economic, and social upheaval” (Fee and Stuart, p. 197).
 - ¹⁰ T. Longman III (1996), “Poetry,” *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity), p. 938.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 938-939.
 - ¹² Clinton Lockhart (1915), *Principles of Interpretation* (Fort Worth: S.H. Taylor), p. 55.
 - ¹³ E.g., Psalm 19:1.
 - ¹⁴ E.g., Psalm 19:7-11.
 - ¹⁵ E.g., Proverbs 12:1-2.
 - ¹⁶ I am not opposed to poetry; it’s simply not a skill or passion of mine. Those who are more creative and artistic than myself doubtlessly have a much greater appreciation for poetry in general. Hopefully this admiration and passion will lead those individuals to be even more appreciative of the beauty of biblical poetry through which God communicated the most important and beautiful truths the world has ever known.
 - ¹⁷ Think of the many songs you know “by heart.”
 - ¹⁸ Fee and Stuart, p. 205.
 - ¹⁹ “Hyperbole” (2016), *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hyperbole>.
 - ²⁰ For a brief discussion on whether babies are born sinners, see Moises Pinedo (2009), “Are Children Born with Sin?” Apologetics Press, www.apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=11&article=2697. See also Kyle Butt (2003), “Do Babies Go To Hell When They Die?” Apologetics Press, <http://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=13&article=1201>.
 - ²¹ When the New Testament writers quoted from an Old Testament writer, they could truthfully say, “the Holy Spirit says” (Hebrews 3:7; cf. Psalm 95:7-11), even when the Old Testament writer did not mention the Holy

- Spirit in the text, **because God is the ultimate Source of the information.** Though God used the vocabulary and style unique to the various inspired writers, He did so with complete control over the words which they wrote (cf. Samuel 23:2; 1 Corinthians 2:13). Indeed, just as Jesus and the New Testament writers had complete trust in even the smallest portions of the Old Testament (cf. John 10:35; Psalm 82:6; Matthew 22:43-44; Psalm 110:1), we should have complete trust in both the Old and New Testaments.
- ²² Cf. Jeremiah 1:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 3:17.
 - ²³ Bible writers throughout Scripture credited Moses with writing the first five books of the Old Testament (Joshua 8:32; 2 Chronicles 34:14; John 1:17; Romans 10:5).
 - ²⁴ Wayne Jackson (2016), “The Four Gospel Accounts,” *Christian Courier*, September, p. 1.
 - ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 - ²⁶ *Ibid.* “See 12:42 where Mark converts the Greek ‘two mites’ [*lepta*] into the Roman term ‘farthing,’” etc. (pp. 2-3).
 - ²⁷ All bold text in Scripture quotations in this article was added for emphasis.
 - ²⁸ John 13:5,6,22-23; 14:5,8; 16:17,29.
 - ²⁹ For a logical and thorough treatment of “when an account of action in the Bible can be used correctly to show that some action is binding on men living today” (p. i), see Thomas B. Warren’s book *When is an “Example” Binding?* (Moore, OK: National Christian Press).
 - ³⁰ There are a **few** areas where “context” may not be as crucial to understanding a given statement, including various proverbs where “the preceding or following parts may not furnish any clue to the meaning of any sentence, or word in the sentence” (Lockhart, p. 108).
 - ³¹ Lockhart, p. 108, italics in orig.
 - ³² Of course, one cannot help but immediately ask if those who parrot this claim actually disobey their own interpretation and “judge” someone whom they deem as “judging” them.
 - ³³ For a brief explanation of Matthew 7:6, see Wayne Jackson (2017), “Concerning ‘Dogs’ and ‘Hogs,’” *Christian Courier*, <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1343-concerning-dogs-and-hogs>.
 - ³⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:1-11; Ephesians 5:11; Romans 16:17; 2 John 9-11.



NOTE FROM

The Editor



AP Offers Two VBS Curricula

Perhaps you are not aware that, in addition to all the other materials produced by Apologetics Press, several years ago we teamed up with Little Acorn to provide churches with VBS curricula. We have two VBS programs. Both are specifically designed to accomplish two objectives: (1) generate the joy that many of us received when we attended VBS as kids, and (2) also prepare kids for the inevitable assault on their faith that they face in our secular society.

Our first VBS is titled “God’s Creation: Digging for Answers.” It addresses several features of Creation, including the days of the Creation week, dinosaurs, and the Flood. It also provides refutations of evolution. Our second VBS is titled “The Bible is God’s Word: Digging for Answers.” It helps young people to see

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materials for elementary children, the curricula also have materials prepared for teens and adults as well.

Literally hundreds of churches have chosen to use these tools. If your congregation isn’t one of them, why not consider using an AP VBS curriculum this summer?

Dave Miller



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for More Details